

**Family on Film: How Disney Visual Media Influences Children's Perceptions of Family  
A Content Analysis**

**An Honors Thesis  
(SOC 424)**

by

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### **Abstract**

The Walt Disney Company has held a decades-long grip on family entertainment through visual media, amusement parks, clothing, toys, and even food. American children, and children throughout the world, are readily exposed to Disney's visual media as often as several times a day through film and television shows. As such, reviewing what this media says and analyzing its potential affects on our society can be beneficial in determining what messages children are receiving regarding values and norms concerning family. Specifically, analyzing family structure can help to provide an outlook for future normative structure. Depicted family interactions may also reflect how realistic families interact, what children expect from their families, and how children may interact with their own families in coming years. This study seeks to analyze various media released in recent years (2006-2011) and how these media portray family structure and interaction.

Family appears to be variant in structure, including varied parental figures, as well as occasionally including non-biological figures. However, the family structure still seems, on the whole, to fit or otherwise promote (through inability of variants to do well) the traditional family model of heterosexual, married biological parents and their offspring. Interestingly, Disney appears to place a great emphasis on fathers. Interactions between family members are relatively balanced, with some families being more positive in interaction and others being more negative. Marriage is still highly valued in Disney media. These results can have detrimental or confusing effects in the development of children's understanding of family structure, relations, and quality.

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## **Introduction**

The Walt Disney Company has been a long-standing business. It began with the musings of one talented artist in a struggling studio, but has since grown into a multi-billion dollar franchise of film, television, toys, theme parks, and even clothing. Through all the years of change, though, the company has continued with producing films and television programming meant for children. As children develop and are exposed to these media, they form and continue to shape values and expectations of their own culture. As Disney is a major contributor to children's media, it is fitting to study these media to learn what they teach children of today.

In this study, I seek to evaluate how Disney films and television shows depict the family. Specifically, I ask: how is the family structure portrayed? Are relationships and interactions between family members positive or negative? And finally, do these structures and relations match a traditional family image? Through this study, it will be made more apparent what children are perceiving and thus, what they will carry into their adult years and later relationships. Currently, American society supports a traditional family model (even if that is not the most common form of family), as defined in the Methods/Coding section of this paper. From what the sample shows, a future outlook of how the family is made up and how its members interact may be deciphered.

## **Literature Review**

What does a traditional family structure look like? Legally, the family has been historically defined through marriage and biology (Kruening, 2010, 76). The family consists of a different-sex couple with biological children. Focus has been made in promoting the idealized “breadwinner father” and “homemaker mother” of the 1950s, even to the present, despite the increased movement of mothers into the workforce (Coontz, 2010, 44). With this structure, fathers are expected to go to work to provide for their families, while mothers stay home and raise the children, as well as take care of domestic needs. Offenses to this structure, such as single motherhood or marriage between homosexual couples, are strongly opposed and discriminated against (Coontz, 2010, 44).

In recent decades, however, several trends away from this model have been noted. First, women have been choosing more since the 1970s and 1980s to have children outside of marriage, rather than have shotgun weddings when they find out they are pregnant (Coontz, 2010, 45). There has also been a considerably high level of divorce since the 1970s, causing families to separate and reform through remarriage to new spouses (46). A dramatic increase in visibility and legal demands for equality for same-sex couples and a greater incidence of cohabitation (couples living together and occasionally having children outside of marriage) between both same- and different-sex couples have been seen (46). Other non-traditional family forms have also developed due to recent technological capabilities, such as artificial fertilization and surrogacy (Kreuning, 2010, 76). Mothers and fathers alike have also begun to spend more time with their children, despite who works and how much they work, rather than relying solely on the mother to interact with offspring (Coontz, 2010, 46).

Many previous studies have been performed with Disney films, but the majority focus on gender stereotypes, especially the role of the woman. Bits of information are secured from such studies, as few articles focus primarily on the family structure and relationships. One analysis done by Tanner, Haddock, Zimmerman and Lund (2003), however, took a closer look at family structure and environment. Tanner, et al., studied twenty-six Disney films spanning in release from 1937 to 2000. The study found that eight of the films observed had what the authors determined to be a traditional family structure: biological, married parents with at least one child. For instance, Tiana's family in "The Princess and the Frog" is "an intact, socially productive (though not necessarily socially mobile) nuclear African-American family" (Lester, 2010, 302). Two of the twenty-six films had no apparent structure (e.g. lacking in parents, guardian, etc.), and sixteen of the films had an alternative family structure (step-family, adoption, or community upbringing), while four films depicted a mix of alternative and traditional structures (Tanner, et al., 2003, pg. 359).

Rare instances of adoption occur in Disney films, especially when there are human characters involved. The most notable adoption is that of Mowgli in "The Jungle Book" because the boy is raised by animals before returning to his own species-appropriate environment: he is initially raised by wolves in the absence of human parents, then foisted upon a bear and panther before returning to a human community which serves as his family (Hubka, Tonmyr & Hovdestad, 2009, 105). None of the twenty-six films of the Tanner, et al., study exhibited same-gender couples (Tanner, et al., 2003, pg. 360). Some representation of extended family was also given in six of the films, with extended family defined as any persons aside from parents and children (Tanner, et al., 2003, pg. 360). Occasionally, these extended family

figures, such as Grandmother Willow in “Pocahontas” provide guidance and advice that a parent does not give (Zarranz, 2007, 58).

Tanner, et al., focused particularly on who or what constituted “parents” in the films. Eleven movies – which constitute roughly 42% of the sample – contained both biological parents, while ten films had only a single parent represented (Tanner, et al., 2003, pg. 361). Interestingly, these ten films with single parents span over the course of release years (1937-2000), rather than being isolated to a certain time period within the sample. Also, most of these single parents were fathers, rather than mothers. However, fathers do not always escape the fate of many Disney mothers (discussed later in this section): death. The early death of Tiana’s father in “The Princess and the Frog” (Lester, 2010, 301) plays an important role in her future though he is no longer present. Of the twenty-six films, eleven gave representation of non-biological parentage: eight showing non-biological parents (such as adoptive parents) and three showed step-parents (Tanner, et al., 2003, pg. 362).

The general picture presented by the findings of Tanner, et al. (2003), is that Disney families are diversified, but not all diverse families are shown equally. While family is considered to be a nurturing and caring environment, with sacrifice being made for the good of the family unit (pg. 367), step-mothers are considered to be “evil” and parental relationships are overly simplified – parents had little interaction with each other, positive or negative, and problems in the marriage were never discussed, let alone resolved (pg. 367). Also, with no representation of transgender, bisexual, gay or lesbian couples or individuals, children may mistakenly perceive these people as abnormal or threatening (Tanner, et al., 2003, pg. 368).

Another author, Susan G. Brydon (2009), took a closer look at mothering through fathers

in select Disney films. She found that there is a trending lack of mothers; they either die or aren't allowed to exist, generally being presumed to be dead but not openly discussed (Brydon, 2009, pp. 134-135). A specific example of this can be seen in "Pocahontas" when the lead character is described as being "confident, brave and politically committed to her people, traits she has inherited from her mother" (Zarranz, 2007, 59), yet the mother is stated as deceased then never mentioned again. When mothers are present in Disney films, Brydon states that they fall into one of four categories: the animalistic mother, the anthropomorphic mother, the fragmented mother, and the ethnic mother. Animalistic mothers are shown in movies in which the characters are predominantly animals, so the mother is portrayed as a non-human figure. Anthropomorphic mothers are depicted as non-human and non-animal objects, such as Mrs. Potts in *Beauty and the Beast*. The fragmented mother is a vague or partial figure; while human, she is not whole or completely visible. Finally, the ethnic mother is a non-white mother in human form (Brydon, 2009, pg. 135). Because these mothers are neither human nor a fit for the modern demographic of the social majority (Caucasian), this essentially devalues the mother by placing her in a "lesser" societal position.

Relationships can be strained between family members, especially father and daughter, in Disney films. Ariel defies her father, King Triton, repeatedly in "The Little Mermaid" and chooses eventually to follow her own desires rather than stay with her family (Lester, 2010, 302). Mulan, though trying to help her family through personal sacrifice, ends up betraying her family's honor by disguising herself as a male soldier – a crime punishable by death (Artz, 2004, 129). Jasmine (from "Aladdin") rejects laws set forth by her father, the Sultan, by refusing to marry at his will (Zarranz, 2007, 58). At the same time, fathers (or father figures) are indulgent

of their daughters, despite their rebellion. King Triton is, when not infuriated, a doting father; the Emperor (while not Mulan's biological father, is essentially the male guardian for all of China) displays a benign, often gracious demeanor; and the Sultan is cuddly and forgiving at all times (Artz, 2004, 122).

### Sample

For the purpose of addressing this research topic, the following films were chosen: *Enchanted* (2007), *Up* (2009), *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), and *Tangled* (2010). The television shows chosen were “Good Luck Charlie” (2010-2011) and “Wizards of Waverly Place” (2007-2011). Disney films and television shows airing in the last five years (2006-2011) were selected as current representations of the family. Each was required to have human characters (as opposed to animals or animated objects). Also, the given media were picked because of their better overall performance in theaters and based on figures of critic and viewer ratings provided by The Internet Movie Database and Rotten Tomatoes, online film rating websites. Selecting these films and programs based on these criteria ensures that a large audience has viewed or has easy access to each. This reduces geographical, economic and ethnic bias by including more viewers in the population. The television episodes which were viewed were chosen randomly from the latest season of each respective show. I put the number of episodes from the latest season of one television show in a hat and drew a number, then repeated the procedure for the other television show. The number drawn was the episode number watched.

### **Method/Coding**

The first variable in determining family structure is number of male guardians present in the film. A subsequent variable more specifically defines what kind of male guardian is present, so for the purpose of this code, only the quantity of male guardians is relevant. The definition of male guardian is any male present in the film or television show that has helped to raise and/or care for the offspring. On the coding sheet, this is indicated by a number. Following the same definition (substituting male for female) and indication, number of female guardians is marked in the adjacent column of the coding sheet. Because the number of occurrences is marked, these data are quantitative.

The next variable identified is whether or not the male and/or female guardians are biologically related to offspring in the media. A mark of either “yes” or “no” was used to indicate whether a genetic connection exists, along with a designation of who is related if there is more than one guardian for each gender. For example, if there are two female guardians and one male guardian, but only one of the females is biologically related to offspring, a mark of “1 male, 1 female - yes, 1 female - no” is made.

After establishing whether or not the guardians are biologically related to the child, whether or not the guardians are married is indicated. Marriage, as applied to this study, signifies any combination of guardians who are married to one another, or that one guardian is married to an outside party who is not a guardian. A marking of “yes” or “no” with qualification between who the married parties are is made. For instance, if there are two guardians, one male and one female, a simple “yes” indicates the two are married to one another. If a guardian is married to an outside party, it is noted as such “yes - male guardian to outside



party.”

The next variable indicates the existence of siblings and their relation to one another. First, the number of siblings and their gender is given (e.g. “2 males”). The distinction is then made as to how the children are related by classification of one of the following: biological, step, half, or adopted. Other children in the household which are not in one of these defined categories will fall into a later variable outlining others who live in the household. A final example of a coding response will look like “2 male, 1 female - males are step siblings to female.”

In order to account for anyone living in the house which is not a guardian, married to a guardian, or a child of the guardians, a final column for household residents was created. “Others” is defined as live-in relatives, long-term houseguests, staff which live in the home, or any other human roommate who has permanent residence in the house. If no additional people are living with the guardians or offspring, “none” is listed. If a live-in resident is present, his or her gender is given with a brief description of his/her connection to the family.

Next, the title or name a child used for his/her guardian(s) was recorded. The purpose of this variable is to distinguish how formal the child is with his/her guardian. For instance, use of a proper name would suggest a more formal interaction. Also, how the child addresses the guardian indicates whether or not the child views him or her as a parent, an authority figure though not a parent, or something else entirely. Any names, monikers, or titles were listed for each guardian.

Once the family structure is defined, coding for interaction is then noted. The first variable of interaction is “instances of conflict.” Conflict is defined as: verbal arguments;

insults; individuals not speaking to one another; or physical abuse, which includes hitting, punching, kicking, squeezing, or using an object to harm another. An “x” was used to designate each time an instance of conflict occurred. Groupings of “x’s” were made to distinguish between whom the conflict occurred. This helps to clarify if most of the conflict is between - guardian(s), guardian and child, or others.

Conversely, positive interactions were coded under “instances of praise/affection.” Praise or affection is defined as: verbal approval (ex. "good job"), verbal expression of positive feeling (ex. "I love you"), verbal encouragement (ex. “You can do it.”), compliments, hugging, kissing, and holding hands. As with the previous variable, each positive interaction was noted by an “x” and grouped by the people between whom the interaction occurred.

Finally, a latent coding category was formed to match the family in each media to the “traditional” family model. For the purposes of this study, the “traditional” family meets the following criteria: presence of both biological mother and father; both biological parents are married to one another; there are no step, half or adopted siblings; there are no other individuals living in household; and children refer to guardians as "mother/mom" and “father/dad.” A designation of “yes”, “no” or “somewhat” was given depending on the amount of defining factors which existed - “yes” if nearly all factors matched, “no” if nearly none of the factors matched, and “somewhat” if several, but not most, factors matched.

## **Results**

General family structure in the majority of the media studied was very similar. All films and television shows had one male guardian, with all but one of these guardians being biologically related to the child or children. Biological mothers were only present in both television shows, but one film lacked a mother figure altogether and another film had two – one biological mother and one mother figure who kidnapped the protagonist child. Four films had biological parents who were married to one another, while three contained an unmarried guardian. A non-biological mother figure, a single father, and an elderly man in temporary custody of the protagonist child were the three unmarried figures depicted. Children also address nearly all guardians as some form of “mother/mom” and “father/dad”, with one exception for the elderly custodian who is referred to by his surname.

Interestingly, only the television shows contained multiple children. In both, two male children and at least one female child were present, suggesting larger families are normative to family structure. None of the films showed more than one child, perhaps in an effort to focus on the protagonist. Only one form of media, one television show, has a live-in family friend not biologically related to the family. The lack of additional residents follows the traditional model of the family as defined in the Methods/Coding section.

Three of the six families met the traditional structure outlined in the methods section (biological mother and father who are married, no step family or half siblings, no other individuals living in the household, reference to guardians as “mother/mom” and “father/dad” or similar names). One of the families nearly completely discounted this model, lacking biological parents, married or unmarried, and not utilizing the identifiers of “mother” or “father”. The

remaining two families met some requirements of the traditional model, but were found lacking in at least one element. Each differed in what the missing variable was. One family lacked verbal reference to biological guardians. Another family was missing a mother figure and contained an additional non-biological female resident, although the father eventually marries this female.

Family interaction is rather less homogenous than family structure in this sample of Disney media. Of a total one-hundred and forty-six interactions between guardians and children or between siblings, eighty-one (or 55.5%) interactions were those of praise or affection and sixty-five (or 44.5%) interactions were those of conflict. Two of the films and one television show exhibited a near equal amount of praise and affection versus conflict, while the other two films showed significantly more instances of praise and affection. The final television show displayed more than twice the number of conflict interactions as positive interactions. All conflict in the films occurred between guardian and child – due to a lack of more than one offspring in each – but evenly across gender. In one television show, the majority of conflict is between parents and children, while the other shows the most conflict between siblings.

In most of the films studied, positive family interactions were interrupted by conflicting needs between guardian and child. In one instance, the non-biological female guardian wanted to keep the child for selfish, magical purposes and thusly denied the child any sense of autonomy, even to the age of eighteen. In another film, the biological female guardian wishes for her daughter to settle down and begin her own family. While this appears to further emphasize the importance of the family, the daughter is career-oriented instead of family-oriented and consequently neglects her mother's wishes. The single father is often times

so busy trying to keep the protagonist out of trouble that he seems to neglect his daughter, who is not present in several scenes without any explanation as to her whereabouts.

In the television shows, a different picture is displayed between both siblings and parents. Siblings tend to work together solely for the purpose of “bringing down” another of their kin. In more cases than not, high sibling competitiveness detracts from the offspring’s ability to get along and show affection toward one another. Also, the parents in each show seem to be quite immature and useless in guiding their children. In one television show, the parents may provide helpful advice on occasion, but are busy pursuing their own interests to oversee the completion of whatever goal the child is working toward. In the second show, the parents only arrive on screen to console their children and suggest alternative solutions *after* the problem has occurred - they are not there to assist their children when they are needed most.

### **Discussion/Conclusion**

While Disney is easily one of the most recognized “family friendly” corporations, there may be discrepancies – at least in recent years – between the ideal family structures and their actual representations. Lena Lee, in studying what messages Korean girls glean from Disney films, found that the general message to take away is that “ordinary people...but also to members of royalty...would feel lonely without a family” (Lee, 2009, 43). Stephen Kanfer suggests that Disney film sweetens up its characters from the harsh and desperate denizens of fairy tales and fantasy, such as Pinocchio and Peter Pan, in order to make them vehicles for the “1950s Hollywood agenda of family values” (Artz, 2004, 120). But is this truly the case? Or has Disney moved on from the realm of the ideal and into that of the realistic?

Regarding family construction, a blend of structures appears to be the new norm. As seen in the results of this study, no family fits perfectly into a traditional model of biological relations and regular warmth and fondness. Even those which generally follow the ideal stumble across mishaps, such as the death of Tiana’s father in “The Princess and the Frog,” the film which most closely represented the outlined model of a conventional family in this study. Each aspect of structure appears to have lack of regularization, from established guardians to offspring and on to live-in companions. This suggests a great change for the family in our culture because a break from the traditional model occurs in not just one, but several aspects of what makes the family what it is.

Guardians are hardly standardized in this study, ranging to include kidnappers, biological parents, and even one recently-made acquaintance. Yet no homosexual, adoptive or even step parents are displayed in these modern media. While Disney may be attempting to reach out to

new variations of what constitutes a caretaker, it has done so in a safe way. Disney provides varying guardians by displaying a *few* variations from the normative heterosexual, married biological parent structure, but still keeps to traditional norms by avoiding controversial parents (e.g. homosexual parents), as well as minimizing the disparity of the few alternate guardians presented. Of the twelve guardians seen, only two were non-biological; one turned out to be a villain in disguise and the other was an elderly man who had once desired to be a father, but was thwarted by fate. The first plays into the “good vs. bad” motif of Disney films and can easily be dismissed as a parental figure when her true allegiance (to herself rather than her supposed daughter) is revealed. The other, an elderly gentleman with a rough past, is thawed out by his shared time and experiences with a young, innocent boy - the antithesis of the villainous mother figure. Both guardians’ lack of biological connection is over-ruled through their association with goodness or badness, so their divergence from the normative biological mother/father model is merely a small step.

As noted in the literature review, Tanner, et al., observe that the lack of differing parental models may cause children to perceive homosexual, adoptive, or even step parents as abnormal or threatening. Even in films released prior to 2006, a subtle distaste for abnormal family structures can be seen. For example, in “Lilo & Stitch,” Mr. Bubbles - under the guise of a social worker - actively works to separate Lilo from her guardian, Nan (Hubka, Tonmyr & Hovdestad, 2009, 106). Nan is an older sister, rather than a parent, and is seen as incapable of properly raising Lilo despite being an adult with her own home. However, by the end of the film, not only are Lilo and Nan reunited, the alien Stitch joins the duo in their new “ohahna”, or family (Hubka, Tonmyr & Hovdestad, 2009, 110). While a happy ending occurs and the family

pulls together into a nuclear unit, the diverse and abnormal group only persists *after* the traditional model is emphasized by Mr. Bubbles, a supposed institutional employee. In comparison to the research found in this study, the same can be argued. As previously discussed, the two variant guardians observed were eventually reformed or discounted because of their goodness or badness. Due to their lack of fit into the traditional model, they were in some way altered, giving the impression that variants need alteration in order to be acceptable guardians.

Marriage also seems to be an important value among Disney media. Slightly older film characters, especially those classified as Disney “princesses”, tend to find and pursue a love interest which ends in marriage. Cinderella escapes her abusive step family by marrying the prince; Prince Eric satisfies his manservant, provides a queen for his kingdom, and alleviates his own loneliness by marrying Ariel; and Jasmine appeases her father, overcomes economic and social barriers, and fills a void created by lack of mother and siblings by taking Aladdin for a husband (Lee, 2009, 42). Even Mulan, despite her feminist actions and practice of “man’s work” eventually returns home to settle down with Shang and take her place in the family faction (Artz, 2004, 129 & 132).

Four of the six media I observed possess heterosexual marriages. Both unmarried father figures were married before the death of their spouses, and one even remarries by the end of the film. Eudora, mother to Tiana in “The Princess and the Frog” stresses that a business may make Tiana happy, but a marriage and love will make her whole. Giselle of “Enchanted” spends the majority of the movie fantasizing about living happily ever after though she hardly knows her husband-to-be; the character of the man is less important to her than the establishment



of their union. The one character which is not or has not married, the kidnapping mother in “Tangled”, winds up aging alone and dramatically dying after falling from a tower. Whether intentional or not, this sends the message to children that a life without marriage is neither choice nor long. If viewers do not actively wish to be married, and thusly actively search for someone to marry, they are doomed at the very least to face rejection from others (as from mothers, such as Eudora). In worst case scenarios, the individual may feel a lack of identity if he or she does not marry, as Giselle suffers when she is ceaselessly prevented from marrying the Prince.

Contrary to the generally accepted social notion that mothers are imperative to the upbringing of children, fathers in Disney film and television appear - on the surface - to have a greater role in the family. While there is an equal representation of both genders in this study’s guardians, fathers tend to participate more in positive interactions than negative ones. Fathers claim nearly half (49.4%) of positive interactions with offspring, but only a third (38.5%) of negative interactions with offspring. This suggests that fathers play a more prominent role in gender stereotyped behaviors, such as nurturing and providing emotional support. Fathers in both film and television shows were more readily available to give advice, offer empathy, and tell their children they are proud of them. A balance of gender roles between heterosexual parents has been a recent trend, but Disney appears to push for a complete eradication of mothers as a secure emotional base for their offspring.

Ken Gillam and Sharon R. Wooden (2008), however, suggest through their study of the Pixar films “Finding Nemo” and “The Incredibles” that parents have a more egalitarian approach in raising their children than is socially idealized. When Nemo’s mother dies, Marlin, Nemo’s father, takes on childrearing alone. He sends Nemo to school, attempts to prepare him for

adulthood, and shows strong emotional attachment through some rough and tumble adventures. When Mr. Incredible comes across a difficult time in his life, Mrs. Incredible is there to “assume the ‘pants’ of the family” (Gillam & Wooden, 2008, 4). Mr. Incredible also changes his attitude over the course of the film from a “lone wolf” father machismo to verbally expressing his need for his wife and working with her and their children as a group to save the day (Gillam & Wooden, 2008, 6).

The overall picture these data, as well as prior research done by Artz and Brydon as outlined in the literature review, provides is that fathers are important in raising, especially in bonding with, their children. Fathers may even be more so important, due to a lack of maternal involvement in both conflict and praise. While biological mothers are present, opposite Brydon’s (2009) suggestion that mothers disappear or die in the majority of Disney media, they are not as actively involved as fathers are. Sociologically, this can impart to children that men, despite stereotyped gender roles, ought to be an influential factor in the family. Likewise, the burden is taken off mothers in their respective gender stereotypes as nurturers, meaning they can take more time for other pursuits, such as the development of a career – a popular option in modern America.

In both films and television shows, it may be proposed that parents have become preoccupied with their own interests and needs to the point that being there for their children is not as important as it was in the past. In some instances, other figures are there to assist and steer the offspring. For example, Pascal, a chameleon helps Rapunzel to make decisions in “Tangled” while several animals (including a firefly, alligator and fellow frog) assist Tiana along the way in “The Princess and the Frog.” In one television show, “Good Luck Charlie”, the

mother is so engrossed in reliving her high school glory that she fails to see the misery her eldest daughter is in as a result of her mother's exuberance and zeal. As a result, children may come to believe that their parents are not going to support them in pursuing their goals because parents are so busy working on their own agenda. Even Artz (2004) notes that "Disney's message to the world is: 'Get whatever you can by force, deceit, or luck. The future of the world revolves around the individual, self-interested actions of naturally-superior elites.'"(139). Children may become stressed in their attempts to become independent from their unhelpful parents, which could lead to a greater pattern of inability to assist their own children later in life.

Interactions between all family members – not just parents and children – have a propensity to be selfish, as disagreement arises due to conflict of interests between members. Each member, young or old, argues for what he or she wants. The results of this study did not show a significant amount more of positive versus negative interactions between family members (a difference of 12 interactions, or 8%), indicating that higher levels of conflict occur in the family compared to the societal assumption that the family is a happy, loving unit. This general picture is slightly imbalanced, though, in representation through this study because two films had a much higher level of positive interaction, but conflict was considerably higher in one television show. This discrepancy can create children to receive mixed messages about the quality of familial relationships, so even if children are exposed to both movies and television shows, they may be confused. On the one hand, films relay the message that families are relatively happy and emotional supportive. However, on television, families are rather disjoint and argumentative.

It is important to note, however, that a relatively high level of conflict can be natural to

see in the television shows studied. Most of the offspring in these Disney media are at an age (roughly 13-17) in which they begin to explore their own independence and break away from their parents. This can create greater conflict of interest between parent and child. Therefore, younger children may reflect that, until they are at such an age, conflict is not normative because the ages of the children they see on television are not representative of their own age. However, come adolescence, the child may be at more risk to be rebellious and defy parental wishes.

In one television show, the parents focus primarily on their first and last-born children (both being females), which suggests that the oldest and youngest may hold more importance or that female children need more attention. A mix of emphasis on female children on the fringes of birth order may also be applicable. Therefore, children may experience a sense of either entitlement or isolation regarding parent involvement, depending on their gender and birth order.

A major limitation of this study is that, for the majority of the media, the protagonist is focused on a particular, self-serving quest. This leaves little room for depiction and emphasis on family, which is perhaps why parental roles may be over-simplified, as Tanner, et al., suggested. Another limitation is that some films showed more emphasis of family among minor characters rather than the protagonist. While the presence of these families may have an impact on a child's formation of normative family ideals, these formations are not as strong as they would be if the family were centered on the protagonist.

Another limitation to this study is a small sample size. Though the media are varied in type and plot, they are limited to live action or animated human forms in order to more easily relate to children. However, many more variety of films and shows exist which employ animal or anthropomorphic characters which may tell a different story altogether.

On the whole, Disney media has transformed from a perceivably stereotypical messenger of values, but in recent years a distinct break from the mold is apparent. Structure has made a shift to include new definitions, such as the addition of the occasional live-in companion or the allowance of non-biological guardians, but this shift has been small. Marriage is still an important institution for characters to pursue. However, parents have become more self-centered and less focused on being there to support their children. Conflict is inevitable, but high rates are predominant in television shows, while lower rates are perceived in film, which can send mixed messages to children. Finally, emphasis on particular children, namely females and those either at the front or back of the age range, is stressed through increased interaction with parents. These changing ideals and norms are likely to persist and grow, as Artz (2004) observes: “Disney animations... have long lives. In addition to the toys, clothes, and other products that outlive the theatre runs, Disney animations are re-released on video and characters reappear in various video and television spin-offs. Actors age and die; cartoon characters are eternal. Based on fairy tales and historic myths rather than current events, Disney features do not become dated as quickly as other genres” (123).

### **Implications**

By depicting a range of family models with few consistencies (such as the importance of biological parents as described in following paragraphs), children are being given a large host of choices concerning what constitutes a family. Rather than being socialized to one particular model, they are seeing a variety of options: non-biological parents, great variations in number of siblings, and even initial strangers as guardians, to name a few. Because of this, children may flounder in forming their own understandings and definition of family. If a poor understanding of family is developed at young ages, future development and relationships may be hindered.

Parents are the most important models for children in forming peer and romantic relationships. If parents are not attentive to their children, do not provide emotional and social guidance or positively interact with their offspring, children are likely to form negative models for future relationships. The context of each parent-child relationship is key in determining how exactly the child will develop, but Disney media depicts a general lack of parental involvement in a child's life other than the occasional sign of affection or argument. Also, as the study showed, some media show large amounts of positive interaction, while others show large amounts of negative interaction. This can create further confusion in children, especially if they do not already have a secure attachment with their parent or guardian, by failing to establish a consistent model of relational behavior.

When parents do interact with their children, a noticeable emphasis is placed upon female, first-born and/or last-born children, as noted above. Therefore, children who are either the eldest or youngest may feel entitlement to preferential treatment or even demand more attention from their parents. Female children may feel that they need more help and attention

from their parents and become more attached or dependent as a result. In later years, too, adults who viewed these media as children may feel it appropriate to be more attentive to their own children who meet these criteria, which can create a greater sense of isolation for middle and/or male children and continue the cycle of favored treatment among particular progeny.

Another area which may cause difficulty in a child's development is the emphasis put on marriage, as mentioned in the discussion/conclusions section. From a young age, children - girls especially - are heavily bombarded by Disney princesses, all of which marry happily to a handsome man (generally a prince). Even characters who have no connection to royalty, such as the homeless Aladdin, stand a good chance of marrying into royalty, though that is an unlikelihood in reality. Children may suffer identity concerns later in life because they are socialized by Disney to value (even covet) marriage. If an individual has a hard time finding an acceptable marriage partner, is unable to marry for whatever reason, or even fails to positively adjust to marriage, he or she may feel like a failure.

In another sense, marriage in Disney media leads children to form fantastical, romanticized images of marriage. They apply these images to the marriage of their parents, and may later in life anticipate a similarly quixotic unfolding of love and marriage to occur. If the parent relationship is not a match to the Disney standard, children may think that their parents are not in love or may dissolve the marriage, which can cause great stress and anxiety in the home environment. Similarly, if a child then fails to fall in love and marry the man/woman of his or her dreams, or alternately does marry but does not have the same starry-eyed relationship, his or her likelihood to create a quality family structure or environment is diminished. By lacking the requisite love, a child may never marry, which completely rules out the family

structure. However, if the child does marry, his or her relationship may be unhappy or lacking in quality due to high standards developed from a young age.

Luckily, it's not all bad news for children's development where Disney is concerned. The greater emphasis on fathers as emotional supports may have significant effects on identity, relationships, and eventual fatherhood of young boys. With the greater allowance of Disney males to express emotions, as particularly seen in Mr. Incredible, young boys may break down some of the gender stereotypes surrounding what makes a person male (e.g. machismo and lack of expressiveness). They may become more communicative with and sensitive to the needs of their peers and partners. Finally, in the event of their reproduction, these males will be more likely to have positive interactions with their children. They, as involved fathers, will also reduce the burden of mothers - especially working mothers, as American society is increasingly supporting women in the workplace - to raise, emotionally support and otherwise care for children.



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# Coding Sheet

	Number of Male Guardian(s)	Number of Female Guardian(s)	Are guardians biologically related to child(ren)?	Are guardians married?	Siblings	Others Living in Household (list)	Child's title use toward guardian(s)
Movie A (Tangled)	1	2	1 male, 1 female yes - 1 female no	Biological guardians are, other female is not	none	none	mother, mommy
Movie B (Up)	1	1	male no, female yes	no	none	none	Mr. Frederickson
Movie C (The P and F)	1	1	yes	yes	none	none	mama, daddy
Movie D (Enchanted)	1	0	yes	no	none	1 female, protagonist princess	dad, daddy
TV Show A (Good Luck, Charlie; season 1, episode 4)	1	1	yes	yes	2 males, 2 females - all biological	none	mom, dad
TV Show B (Wizards of Waverly Place, season 4, episode 5)	1	1	yes	yes	2 males, 1 female - all biological	1 female, friend of family	mom, dad

# Coding Sheet

Instances of Praise or Affection	Instances of Conflict	Closeness to traditional family image	General Observations
xxx - biological female and child; xx - biological male and child; xxxx xxxx - child and non-biological female guardian 20 instances	xxxx xxxx xxx - child and non-biological female guardian 18 instances	Somewhat - without kidnapping, traditional family structure; obvious warmth between biological relations; no reference to father figure; high levels of both positive and negative with non-biological guardian but more negative	Child worries about hurting feelings of kidnapping mother, but wants autonomy; kidnapping mother shows concern when child missing, but for magical hair or person?; "mother" more worried about image
xxxx xxxx - child and non-biological male guardian; x - child and biological female guardian 15 instances	xxxx xxxx x - child and non-biological male guardian 16 instances	No - lack of biological guidance/supervision; balance of positive and negative interactions; reference to guardian by surname	Male guardian is temporary due to circumstance; mention of biological father and step-mother, but absent from movie; biological female only in one scene
xxxx x - child and biological female guardian; xxxx xx - child and biological male guardian 13 instances	xx - child and biological female guardian 2 instances	Yes - traditional structure; more positive than negative interactions; traditional references to guardians; no external family members	mother stresses desire for daughter to marry and form own family
xxxxx xxxx x - biological male guardian and child 11 instances	xxxx - biological male guardian and child 5 instances	Somewhat - mother figure missing though father is biological, high levels of positive interaction, live-in female whom father marries at the end, traditional reference toward father	generally conflict between parent and child is short-lived and not serious due to age difference; not terribly many interactions between father and daughter
xxxxx - mother and daughter 1, x - father and son 1, xxxx - son 1 and daughter 2, xxx - son 1 and son 2 14 instances	xxxxx - mother and daughter, x - father and son 1, x - son 1 and son 2, xxx - father and daughter 1, x - son 1 and son 2 11 instances	Yes - traditional structure, more positive interactions than negative, mom/dad reference, no extras living in the house	centered around baby and first-born, may suggest preference for oldest and youngest children? parents very youthful, almost like
xxx - daughter and son 1, x - father and mother, xxxx - father and son 2 8 instances	xxxx - father and son 2, xxxx xx - daughter and son 1, x - mother and father, xxx - son 1 and son 2, xx - daughter and son 2 17 instances	Somewhat - traditional structure, but live-in female, traditional reference to guardians, much more conflict than praise/affection	siblings only get along when working against one another, parents there to console after problem, but not really present DURING problem

Total instances = 81

Total instances = 69